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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that nearly all language-minority children and adolescents are language brokers for their parents and other family members. Children from diverse language backgrounds and as young as eight or nine years old perform difficult and demanding linguistic and communication tasks normally done by adults, both related and unrelated to school activities. Brokering itself exposes the children to more language and helps them acquire more language skills. For immigrants and refugees, the brokering process typically begins soon after arrival in the United States. Studies also suggest that brokering helps brokers maintain native language skills as well as develop English skills. English language skills achieved through brokering are not always reflected in academic achievement, however, suggested that school settings do not provide an accurate picture of student competence. Alternative assessment methods might be developed to measure student skills more accurately. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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When Students Translate For Parents: Effects of Language Brokering

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Lucy Tse is a Ph.D. student in language education at the University of Southern California, a current Title VII Bilingual Education and AERA Spencer/Travel Fellow, and has worked extensively with language minority students.

Teachers and school personnel know the work of language brokers. They are our language minority (LM) students who interpret and translate between parents, teachers, friends, neighbors, and many others. Language brokers convey messages for people who would otherwise not be able to communicate because of cultural and/or linguistic differences.

Brokers not only transmit information, however; they often influence the contents of the messages they convey, sometimes significantly, and make decisions on behalf of the parties for whom they broker. In turn, brokering appears to significantly affect LM students' first and second language development.

Nearly All LM Students are Brokers

Recent research on language brokers suggests that nearly all LM children and adolescents act as language brokers, regardless of their length of residence in the U.S. and the availability of older and more knowledgeable brokers in their families. One study with Chinese and Vietnamese-American students (Tse, 1994a) found that 90% reported brokering, and among those who didn't, all but one had an older sibling who brokered. In a similar study of Latino high school students, 100% reported brokering.

Brokers Assume Adult Responsibilities

Children from diverse language backgrounds (e.g. Cambodian, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Spanish) and as young as eight or nine perform difficult and demanding tasks normally done by parents or other adults (McQuillan & Tse, 1994; Tse 1994a, 1994b; Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez & Shannon, 1994). School-related tasks include translating notes for their parents, interpreting in parent-teacher conferences, talking to school personnel on behalf of younger siblings, and relaying messages from parents to school officials. Outside of school, brokers noted performing other challenging day-to-day tasks such as translating bank and credit card statements, corresponding with governmental agencies, and translating rental agreements and job applications for family and friends. In both in and out-of-school tasks, LM students act on behalf of and sometimes even in place of their parents. As a result, they make many decisions for themselves, their siblings, parents, and friends.

Brokers Develop Language From Brokering

Despite the young age at which brokering begins and the complexity of many broker tasks, they appear to be performed with relative precision. Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) found in two studies of 68 bilingual children that they translate with high accuracy, making very few mistakes in either language. What this suggests is that brokers must have high levels of both cognitive and linguistic ability to perform with such skill.

How are LM students developing such high levels of language? Brokers themselves provide one answer. Many of the subjects reported that brokering itself exposes them to more language input which in turn causes more language acquisition (Krashen, 1985) and higher levels of language proficiency (McQuillan & Tse, 1994; Tse, 1994a; Tse, 1994b). In two studies of 35 Latino and 64 Chinese and Vietnamese high school students, over 50% of those foreign-born believed that brokering helped them learn English. A subject in McQuillan and Tse's (1994) study noted:

> *It (brokering) really helped me...learn to translate in both languages. I had to understand what was going on in English in order to explain it in Spanish to my mother. Yet, at the same time, I had to understand Spanish well enough to communicate what my mother felt to whoever (sic) was speaking English. So, I really had to know what was going on in both languages in order to do that (p. 23).*

LM Students Broker Rapidly After Arrival

Brokers' belief that brokering aids language acquisition is further confirmed by the rapidity with which LM students begin brokering after arrival in the U.S. Of the 64 Chinese and Vietnamese students in Tse's (1994a) study, 50% said that they began brokering within one year of arrival. The survey of Latino students (1994b) found that nearly 40% brokered within four years and 88% brokered within five years. Some of the students appear to fall within Cummins' (1989) five to seven year time frame for developing academic-level literacy, while others appear to be reaching high levels of proficiency more rapidly. Regardless of whether students are meeting or surpassing Cummins' time frame, there is little doubt that these students are learning English and their proficiency appears to be developing quite rapidly. If we keep in mind that nearly all students broker and that they are effective interpreters and translators (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1991), then strong evidence exists to counter popular perceptions that LM students are not learning English. Not only are they developing high levels of proficiency, they are demonstrating them in challenging daily tasks.

Brokering Helps Maintain First Language

Broker studies also suggest that brokering helps LM students maintain their first language (L_1). Over half of the Chinese and Vietnamese-Americans in the study reported above said that brokering helped them learn more of their L_1. This was echoed by the Latino subjects; 50% of the U.S.-born subjects said that brokering benefitted their L_1 development. Kim, a Vietnamese-American student, recounted her brokering experiences as a child and provides further support of brokering's effects on L_1 development (McQuillan & Tse, 1994). She began brokering quite young, having immigrated at age three, and she believes that it helped her maintain and develop proficiency in Vietnamese, while her younger sister who is only one year younger, did not broker and did not develop proficiency in Vietnamese.

Discrepancy Between Brokers' English Proficiency and School Achievement

Although brokers appear to develop relatively high levels of English proficiency, such proficiency is not always reflected in their school achievement. The mean grade received by the Latino high school subjects in their English classes was a C (2.23/4.00). Given that many of these same students reported translating relatively complex documents such as rental agreements, we would expect that their grades in English would be higher. One explanation for this apparent contradiction is that traditional school assessment tools are not accurately measuring students' language proficiencies. Research in recent years has suggested that decontextualized and inauthentic tools, such as standardized tests, may not be providing accurate information about LM students' abilities (Cummins, 1989; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Wong-Fillmore, 1983). Although other social and cultural factors may be involved (see DeVos & Suarez-Orozco, 1990; Ogbu, 1990; Freire, 1988), it appears current school settings may be providing an inaccurate picture of student competence.

Implications of Brokering

There are several pedagogical and policy implications of brokering.

- First, the research on brokers suggests that LM children take on adult responsibilities, and may act as decision-makers for themselves and their family. They may be taking on this role due to inadequate support by schools and other agencies for non-English speaking parents. Identifying and providing additional support services for such children and their families is needed if these students are to have the same educational opportunities as their language majority peers.

Many of the subjects reported that brokering itself exposes them to more language input which in turn causes more language acquisition (Krashen, 1985) and higher levels of language proficiency.

- Second, the rapidity and apparent accuracy with which students broker suggests that LM students are learning English well and fairly soon after their arrival. The broker data counter any claims that LM students are not learning English and that L_1 development impedes that development.
- Finally, if LM students are indeed developing high levels of English proficiency as the broker research suggests, educators may need to reconsider the types of assessment that are used to measure student ability. Perhaps alternative types of assessment involving tasks meaningful to LM students would more accurately measure student competence.

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